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The Virtual Call Center: Will It Work For Your Business?

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By Karen Schwartz

Leveraging Virtual Call Centers to Capitalize on Talent, Time Zone and Cost Savings

Here's a laundry list of difficult issues for companies with contact centers. Check all that apply:

- Motivating call center agents
Finding qualified staff with skills in specific areas
Staff attrition
Workforce scheduling and staffing contact centers 24x7
Dealing with call spikes and peak volume demands
Labor costs

Most contact centers would check off everything on that list, and probably add a few of their own. These challenges have led more and more contact centers — some household names and a lot of smaller companies as well — to move to the virtual contact center model.

The name is something of a misnomer; it's virtual in some respects, but it's a real, live (if dispersed) contact center with real, live agents manning it. The call center agents are not in the same location, however, and they often don't work traditional eight-hour shifts.

Although agents are decentralized in multiple locations, they are, with the help of call center software designed for this purpose, managed as a single team. The call center application software, from companies like Angel.com, CosmoCom, Contactual and VocalCom (and dozens more), helps call center managers balance call volumes based on traffic or type of call, reduce wait times and increase customer satisfaction.

Other call center benefits include the ability to forecast and schedule once, since the contact centers are treated as a single resource; increasing global coverage; deploying applications in a standard manner; and creating more opportunity for expansion, since physical space isn't an issue.

Labor cost is another win. Contact centers are notoriously expensive to run, but hiring employees in less expensive locales can cut down on expenses, as can employees who work from home instead of in a standard contact center.

And it's clearly taking off; companies including AT&T, U-Haul, JetBlue, Hilton Hotels and 1-800-Flowers are going full-force, along with many others. But it's not just large companies; according to hosted contact center provider Appia Communications, small and mid-sized companies are jumping on the bandwagon just as fast.

Still, it's not a slam-dunk for everyone. The ContactBabel study found that about half of respondents were concerned about security, complexity, management and business benefits. ContactBabel admitted in its study that this is complicated stuff, especially where the business has a complicated infrastructure.

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Contact center research from ContactBabel shows that properly implemented virtual call centers can mitigate call volume peak periods, improve call routing, reduce wait times, balance agent utilization and increase customer satisfaction.

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Comments

By Shaun Morgensten

We're considering using virtual call center agents in Malaysia or possibly the Philippines to provide 24 by 7 support. What issues or difficulties should we prepare for when kicking off our virtual contact center?

RW3 CultureWizard released a virtual call center research study titled 'Virtual Teams Survey Report 2010 - The Challenges of Working in Virtual Teams.' According to the report, in which survey respondents indicated that 80% were corporate managers who work virtually at least part of the time and 63% are members of global virtual teams, the key factors that impair contact center productivity are cultural differences, communication styles, time-zone differences, language and a lack of face-to-face contact. The survey identifies the three most challenging areas as time zone and language difficulties, communication styles and cultural differences.

Time zones and language differences topped the list. 81% indicated time zones presented the greatest obstacle for virtual teams, followed by 64% who found language (accents and dialects) to be the top barrier. In terms of communication challenges, 94% said the inability to read non-verbal cues is very challenging, and 90% stated the absence of face-to-face get togethers interfered with their ability to build a relationship. Additionally, 81% said being virtual made it more difficult to establish trust and rapport. With regard to cultural differences, 80% said that virtual teams slowed down decision making, 77% were hampered by different leadership or management styles and 76% felt different methods of decision-making were a challenge.

By Tonya Probert

I'm very surprised contact center morale, agent motivation or staff engagement weren't cited as top factors in managing remote contact center agents.

That's a good point. While there was no mention in the research report, I suspect that is in part as contact center agent motivation and morale is a challenge whether virtual or physical. Hewitt Associates released a study that shows employee engagement and morale in the workplace are falling globally. Almost half of organizations around the world saw a significant drop in employee engagement levels at the end of the June 2010 quarter - the largest decline Hewitt has observed since it began conducting employee engagement research 15 years ago. This highlights the growing tension between employers, many of which are struggling to stabilize their financial position, and employees, who are showing fatigue in response to stress, uncertainty and confusion brought about by the global recession and strain in the contact center industry. Hewitt's analysis suggests a link between agent engagement levels and the company's financial performance. Companies with high levels of engagement (where 65% or more of employees are engaged) outperformed the total stock market index even in volatile economic conditions. During 2009, total shareholder return for these companies was 19% higher than the average total shareholder return. Conversely, companies with low engagement (where less than 40% of employees are engaged) had a total shareholder return that was 44% lower than the average. Clearly this research is actionable for forward thinking contact center leaders and managers.

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